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ABSTRACT

To explore the relation between social contact and loneliness in a college student population, 40 male and 41 female undergraduates kept daily calendars of social contacts, recorded their activities for one week, and completed inventories on feelings and social interactions. A replication study involved 64 male undergraduates. The absolute level of social contact was found to have only a moderate and inconstant relation to self-reported loneliness. Although a relation between a relative change in level of social contact and loneliness was not directly examined, subjects who had suffered a recent loss or separation differed significantly on mean scores of loneliness scales from those without a loss. The correlation between social support and loneliness suggests that it is the quality of the relationship that is important in terms of loneliness. Psychopathology was found to have a significant correlation with loneliness but a near-zero correlation with absolute level of social contact. Results suggest it is the perceived quality or relative quantity rather than the absolute level of social contact that is important in determining loneliness. (NRB)

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Social Contact and Loneliness in a University Population

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Previous studies concerned with social isolation have conceptualized it in a pejorative sense and measured it by inference. Faris and Dunham (1960), for example, assumed that the social relationships of people living in transient, center-city areas were short term and meaningless and that such people were therefore socially isolated. The aims of the present study, working from Townsend's (1957) definition of social isolation as the lack of social contact with family and community, are the measurement of social contact in a more objective and quantifiable manner and the use of this measure in an exploratory study describing the relations of several other variables to social contact.

As defined by Townsend, loneliness is the unwelcome feeling of a lack or loss of companionship. Though loneliness may be the result of a lack of social contact, it is not necessarily the affective component of social contact. Studying the elderly, both Lowenthal, Berkman, and Associates (1967) and Townsend found some subjects who were isolated and claimed not to be lonely. The present study is intended to explore the relation between social contact and loneliness in a college student population.

Faris and Dunham were among the first to suggest that social isolation had a destructive effect on personality. More recently, Lynch (1977), drawing mainly on circumstantial data, concluded that social isolation may lead to premature death. Data do exist, however, to suggest that absolute level of social contact is not related to mental health (Bradburn, 1969; Lowenthal, 1964). Rather, what may be important is a change in level of social contact (Bradburn, 1969; Lewinsohn and Libet, 1972; Politano, 1977). If this is the case, then loneliness, which may be related to a decrease in or a perceived lack of social contact rather than to the absolute level of social contact, should be related to psychopathology. The present study will investigate this possibility.

Also explored in the present study are the relations between loneliness and social contact and perceived social support from family and friends. Though social contact is by definition related to the amount of contact with family and friends, it was not expected to be related to perceived levels of social support. Rather loneliness, representing a dissatisfaction with one's relationships, was expected to co-vary with social support.

Method

Study 1 and a replication (Study 2) are reported here in parallel. For Study 1, 40 male and 41 female undergraduate students volunteered to take part, for experimental credit, in a study of social interaction. Sixty-four male undergraduates volunteered for a similar experiment for Study 2. In both instances subjects were informed that they would be asked to keep a record of their activities for a week as well as to fill out several paper and pencil inventories of feelings and social interactions.

Materials. Daily calendars, each of 24 hour length and divided into 96 fifteen minute segments, were used to measure social contact. In each segment the subject noted the first name or names of the person or persons with whom he or she spent that time, the type of relation (family,

spouse, boy or girlfriend, close friend, friend, and colleague or co-worker) that he or she had to that person, and whether he or she was alone, asleep, in the mere presence of the person(s) or in a social or non-social interaction. For a molecular analysis of the calendars one can look at specific components such as the percentage of waking time spent in social activities with close friends. Or, in order to get an overall estimate of social contact, one can collapse over relations and calculate the total percentage of waking time that was spent in social activities (SocCon).

In both studies Bradley's Loneliness Scale (NG-Scale) as modified by Nerviano and Gross (1976) was used to measure loneliness. Scores could range from 20 to 100 on this Likert scale with higher scores representing greater degrees of loneliness. In Study 2, loneliness was also assessed with the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-Scale) (Russell, Peplau, and Ferguson, 1978). Again, higher scores represent greater degrees of loneliness; the possible range of scores is from 20 to 80.

A problem check list (PCL) containing 126 items was used as a measure of pathology in both studies. Eleven items were eliminated from this scale as a majority of seven faculty members and graduate students queried felt that they were related to either loneliness or social contact. This scale was scored by counting the number of problems which the subject checked. Thus, higher scores are indicative of a greater number of perceived problems. As only three subjects in Study 1 received scores above 60, this was used as a ceiling value in both studies. This value was also used, of course, in the replication sample.

In both studies two measures of social support, perceived social support from family (FAMSUP) and perceived social support from friends (FRNDSUP), were measured with questionnaires derived by Procidano and Heller (1979). Scores could range from zero through 20 with higher scores indicating perception of greater amounts of social support.[1]

Procedure. Subjects were seen twice in groups of under 20. During the first meeting the subjects were given seven daily calendars and definitions of the different types of interactions (social, non-social, etc.) and the different types of relations (family, boy or girlfriend, etc.). After reviewing the definitions, instructions were given regarding the calendars and the first calendar was completed for the period from the preceding midnight to the time of the experiment. The subjects were instructed to record their interactions four times a day and to return in one week.

The following week the calendars were collected and, after supplying biographical and demographic information the subjects filled out the other measures. After this the nature of the experiment was explained and questions were answered.

Results

In Study 1, five subjects (three male, two female) did not return for the second session and the data of four subjects (three male, one female) were deleted from the analyzes as they had not followed directions. For Study 2, eight subjects did not return for the second session. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the different variables for 34 male and 38 female subjects from Study 1 as well as for the 56 males in Study 2.

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Insert Table 1 about here

The possibility that level of loneliness was independent of level of social contact was examined using product moment correlations. For male subjects in Study 1 the correlation between loneliness and social contact was negative, moderate and significant (see Table 2). For female subjects, and for the male subjects in the replication the correlation was not significant. Additionally, for all three groups of subjects the product moment correlation coefficients between loneliness and the individual components calculable from the daily calendars were calculated. None was significant. Though the idea that loneliness and social contact are independent was not totally corroborated, it seems that if there is a relation it is at best small (with at most 17.6% of the variance shared) and inconstant.

The relationships of social contact and loneliness to the other variables were also examined using product moment correlations. As loneliness and social contact were themselves correlated for the males in Study 1, partial correlations were used for these subjects and are reported in Table 2. Other than its correlation with the Nervianc and Gross Loneliness Scale and the number of close friends (NumFrnds) for the male subjects in Study 1, social contact did not significantly correlate with any variables for either the male or female subjects in Study 1 or the subjects in Study 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Loneliness, on the other hand, significantly correlated with most of the variables for both male and female subjects and in both samples. In Study 1 there was a moderately large, positive, significant correlation of loneliness and psychopathology as measured by the problem check list. This correlation was also significant in Study 2 when the same measure of loneliness (NG-Scale) was used; when loneliness was measured with the UCLA scale the correlation was small, positive, and significant at p less than 0.10. In both samples, for both males and females, and for both measures of loneliness, there was a small to moderate, negative, significant correlation between loneliness and perceived social support from family. The same relations held true for perceived social support from friends except that the correlation was not significant for the female subjects.

The mean scores of the subjects, subgrouped by the demographic variables, were compared. Few differences were found which were consistent across sex and sample. Those subjects who reported having suffered a recent loss or separation also reported, on the loneliness scales, a greater degree of loneliness. No difference in absolute level of social contact was found. Subjects who felt that they had too few friends were not found to differ from other subjects in level of social contact, loneliness, or number of close friends. Those without a boyfriend or girlfriend did not report less social contact but, depending upon the sex and the study, reported more loneliness. Few consistent differences were found for those whose parents were divorced or those who were first born or only children.

Discussion

As stated above, it is clear that for this population and this manner of measuring loneliness and social contact, the absolute level of social contact bears at best a moderate and inconstant relation to self-reported degree of loneliness. The possibility that it is a relative change in level of social contact that is related to loneliness was not directly examined. Some weak evidence accrues to this idea from the fact that those subjects who reported having suffered a recent loss or separation (and thus may possibly have had a consequent decrease in level of social contact) differed significantly on the mean scores of the loneliness scales from those who did not report such a loss.

The correlation between social support and loneliness suggests that it is the quality of the relationship that is important in terms of loneliness. Though perceived social support was found to bear no relation to social contact, it was found to be directly related to loneliness. That is, the more social support a person perceived him or herself to have the less lonely he or she reported being. As Rubinstein, Shaver, and Peplau (1979) suggested, it seems to be the perception of reality that determines loneliness.

The present study also provided corroboration for the idea that pathology, as measured by the number of problems endorsed on a problem check list, is related to loneliness but not to absolute level of social contact. Thus this study does not support the idea that a low level of social contact is, in and of itself, detrimental.

Several alternative explanations of these results are possible. First, the measure of social contact used in this study may not be sufficient. However, compared to earlier studies, many of which relied on conjecture or simply tallied the number of contacts, the percentage of waking time spent in social contact seems to be a step toward the quantification of social contact. Additionally, even when social contact was broken down into its component parts, no relation was found between any absolute measure of social contact and loneliness.

A problem more difficult to rebut is the reliance of this study on self-report data and the possibility that inter-correlations of measures may be due to either response bias or similarity of response mode. Thus, people who are willing to endorse negative items about themselves would do so on the problem check list, the loneliness scales, and the social support measures. However, it is not as clear what is considered positive or negative on the daily calendars. One could, therefore, argue that significant correlations between social contact (computed from the daily calendars) and the other paper and pencil measures should not be expected. No satisfactory answer can be given for this problem.

Finally, one could argue that the subjects in this study were not "clinically" lonely and that these findings are of little generalizability or utility. The samples in this study were not selected on the basis of loneliness and the mean score on the UCLA scale is comparable to that of the normative university population. Yet loneliness and social contact are definitely a problem for this group. Eleven questions on the PCL were not used as they were felt to be related to the dependent variables; only 47 of the 128

students did not check one of these as a problem. The similarity of the finding of a lack of a relation between loneliness and social contact for college students and for the elderly suggests that the near zero correlation is neither age specific nor specious.

This study suggests that advising a client who is complaining of loneliness simply to increase his or her number of friends or level of social contact is not a guaranteed panacea. To the extent that it is the perceived quality or relative quantity rather than the absolute level of social contact that is important, there seems to be no certain level of social contact which is most appropiate.

Footnotes

[1]Also measured in Study 1 or Study 2 but not here reported were the McAndrew and the Miller Alcohol Scales, the Eysenck Personality Inventory, the Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss self-consciousness scales, and the Levenson and Gottman, social skills scales.

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TABLE ONE

Means and Standard Deviations

	Study 1		Study 2
	Males n= 34	Females n= 38	Males n = 56
Social Contact	45.5, 13.2	50.4, 14.4	45.3, 15.9
N-G Scale	38.4, 12.6	36.6, 11.0	38.2, 10.8
UCLA Scale			39.5, 10.6
PCL	24.1, 16.4	22.4, 15.1	17.0, 11.9
Famsup	12.6, 4.7	17.4, 5.7	12.4, 5.6
Frndsup	15.0, 4.4	17.4, 2.9	13.8, 4.5
NumFrnds	9.3, 11.1	11.9, 10.4	6.1, 4.2

Note. (Mean, Standard Deviation)

TABLE TWO

Correlations of Variables

	SOCIAL CONTACT			N-G SCALE			UCLA-SCALE
	Study 1		Study 2	Study 1		Study 2	Study 2
	Males n=34	Females n=38	Males n=56	Males n=34	Females n=38	Males n=56	Males n=56
N-G scale	-.42**	-.19	-.14				.75***
UCLA Scale			-.04				
PCL	.22a	-.00	.06	.57b***	.43***	.34***	.25*
Famsup	-.11a	.01	-.09	-.37b**	-.34**	-.39***	-.35***
Frndsup	-.03a	.19	-.11	-.58b***	-.23	-.50***	-.31**
Numfrnds	-.44a**	.25	-.01	-.02b	-.01	.02	-.06

Note. a = N-G Scale partialled out
b = Social Contact partialled out
* = $p < .10$
** = $p < .05$
*** = $p < .01$